Jill Noon Memorial Service
June 13, 2016, 3:00pm
Ravinia

Jill Noon was, quite simply, one of the most extraordinary people I have ever been privileged to know. I've known Chris Noon for a very long time. We were both a lot younger. He was a student at Purdue University and I was a young Presbyterian minister in Lafayette, Indiana. Somehow Chris found us and began to attend worship. And when, twenty years later, we came to Chicago, Chris and I reconnected, and now there was Jill and two little boys. I baptized them both and have loved watching them from afar grow and become the great young men they are today. I never had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with Jill, and yet we had a special bond which centered around - of all things - baseball.

When I heard from Chris about Jill's initial diagnosis I telephoned immediately, talked with Jill for several minutes, told her she would be in my prayers, assured her that she would not be alone in whatever was now ahead of her, that she would be surrounded and held up by the love and prayers of the many people who loved her, and that the God who created her and gave her life would be with her as well - whatever came.

I did note that there was a lot of commotion going on in the background and assumed I had caught her at the grocery store. Much later she told me, laughing, that I had caught her in Florida, at a baseball game in which her college son as pitching. She knew that I also had a college son who was a pitcher and so understood that we shared that unique experience - elation when he strikes out the other team's clean up hitter, and utter pain, deep pain, unlike any other, when the people in the bleachers around us begin to boo our son because he just walked in the winning run. We laughed together about that.

It was my very great privilege to know her better recently.

We talked about her illness - about which she was absolutely candid, about what now lie ahead for her. We talked about this - her memorial service. She was a matter of fact, always slightly, irreverently whimsical, and teared up only when we talked about final goodbyes to her dear ones - Chris and and .

Afterward, walking home, I thought to myself - I've been doing this for more than 50 years and that was one of the healthiest, most extraordinary conversations I have ever had, and Jill Noon is one of the healthiest, strongest, most courageous people I have ever known.

We all know in lie hearts that it is quality not quantity that matters: that it's not how long a person lives but how they lived that matters ultimately. We can say that wholeheartedly about Jill. And yet something in us doesn't understand, doesn't like at all, cannot make peace with, a wonderful, vibrant young women, wife, mother, who dies years, decades, too soon. It is the most natural thing in the world to push back, to say in our hearts, "this is not right" and to ask "Why? Why did this happen. Why, if there is a God, did God cause or allow Jill to die?"

Some, somehow, find comfort in concluding that whatever happens, including this, is God's will. May I respectfully suggest that that conclusion does not square with anything we know and believe? May I suggest that the one thing we must not say is that it was God's will that Jill die.

What the Judeo-Christian tradition - Jews and Christians - believe is that the God who created the universe, the world and everything in it, the God who creates and breathes life into us loves so much as to give us freedom. As a mother loves her nursing child, so, God says, I love you. As a father loves his son and opens his arms to welcome his son home, so do I love you. Of all the sophisticated philosophical and theological constructs with which to think about God and the mystery of life and death, nothing is more profound than motherhood - fatherhood. Parents know that love requires a final "letting go": that one day - because you love so much - you must allow them to venture out

into the world and face risks: the day you agree that he can ride his bicycle in the street: the day she walks to school alone: the first time he or she takes the family car. Love creates, nurtures and then grants freedom and that always means risk. The converse is true. It is not love to protect your child from all risk, never to leave your sight, never to venture from home. Love means risk and risk means bad things can happen - physical accidents, biological mishaps.

What God is doing now is what any parent would be doing - weeping: grieving over a beloved child.

The second thing Jews and Christians believe about this is that God is with us, a loving presence, particularly when we are in trouble, when freedom turns into tragedy. And nowhere is that idea expressed as in a poem we share, sacred to Christians and Jews - the 23rd Psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside still waters,
He restores my soul.....

Even though I walk through the
Darkest valley - the valley of
The shadow of death -
I will fear no evil,
For you are with me,
Your rod and your staff,
They comfort me.

Jill Noon embraced life, loved life, lived life fully - and the creator of her life is honored by that. "God is honored," St. Augustine said, "when a human being is fully alive."

Jill, it seems to,me, knew deeply the truth of lovely lines from a poem by Mary Oliver....

I am learning to rise,
waking up,
simply to praise,
everything in the world that is
strong and beautiful.....

Always the trees, the rocks,
the fields, the news from heaven,
the laughter.

The news from heaven is that the creator loves us, and that nothing that ever happens to us can change that.

Thinking about that great mystery which he learned through the death and resurrection of Jesus, his Lord, St. Paul wrote:

"for I am convinced that neither death nor life,
not angels nor rulers,
nor things present nor things to come..."

That means illness, malignancy, not even death
"Can separate us for the love of God."

The news from heaven is good - quiet, but very good..

God loved Jill while she loved.

God loves her now.

Thanks be to God.